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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 6609
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 5138
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 9283
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1823
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 5968
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 003648

SIPDIS

NSC FOR WILDER AND PHU

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SUBJECT: THAI HOUSE ELECTS DEMOCRAT ABHISIT AS NEXT PRIME MINISTER

REF: A. BANGKOK 3529 (COURT DISSOLVES PPP)
1B. BANGKOK 3154 (EX-COP THREATENS)
1C. BANGKOK 2243 (NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT)

BANGKOK 00003648 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b and d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

11. (C) The Thai House of Representatives on December 15 elected Democrat Party Leader Abhisit Vejjajiva as Thailand's next Prime Minister by a vote of 235-198; we recommend that, as with Abhisit's last two predecessors, the President call to congratulate the PM-elect. Abhisit will likely receive his formal appointment by King Bhumibol in a few days, forming a cabinet soon thereafter. Abhisit won the Prime Ministership with the support of most members of the political parties that had formerly lined up with the party loyal to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Abhisit defeated former Police General Pracha Promnok, leader of the Motherland Party, who had the support of pro-Thaksin legislators. A large demonstration by pro-Thaksin "redshirts" in Bangkok on December 13, featuring a pre-recorded message from Thaksin, failed to sway members of the Newin Chidchob faction, which defected to the Democrats. Following the vote, scores of pro-Thaksin "redshirts" angrily protested the vote. Thaksin, who is in Italy, phoned the Ambassador following the vote to complain about the Democrats' use of money politics; he predicted Abhisit would remain in office for six months at most.

12. (C) Comment: The Democrats (who have been out of the government since 2001) and various anti-Thaksin forces, including the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), have reason to cheer Abhisit's victory, though the real challenge to Abhisit and the Democrats lies ahead: proving they can govern effectively in a country as divided as Thailand is currently. It remains unclear whether the "redshirts" will mount sustained, vehement protests, or pick their moments, such as when Abhisit will present his government's program once the cabinet is formed and sworn in by the King.

13. (C) Comment, continued: Abhisit and his team will have to devote considerable effort to coalition management, as the

pro-Thaksin Puea Thai Party -- now in opposition -- remains the largest in the House and can call a no-confidence debate at will once the next general session commences in late January. Although January 11 by-elections are not likely to shift the balance in the House decisively, the defection of Abhisit's newfound coalition partners back to the pro-Thaksin camp could bring an abrupt end to Abhisit's administration. We hope that, as in the late 1990's, the Democrats will prove more willing than others to press the Burmese junta to undertake democratic reforms. We will seek early opportunities to engage the Abhisit administration on Burma, as well as other foreign policy priorities that have taken a back seat to Thailand's domestic political crisis, such as Thailand's ASEAN Chairmanship and its pledged UNAMID deployment. End Summary and Comment.

THE VOTE: DP RECLAIM PM SLOT AFTER 8 YEARS

¶4. (U) On the morning of December 15, the House elected Democrat Party (DP) Leader Abhisit Vejjajiva (phonetic: AHP-pee-sit WET-cha-chi-wah) as Thailand's next Prime Minister, and the DP's first since before the Thaksin era began in 2001. Abhisit defeated the candidate of the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai Party, retired General Pracha Promnok, who recently became Party Leader of the Motherland Party but failed to win the support of all Motherland MPs. The vote was 235-198 in Abhisit's favor, with three abstentions.

¶5. (C) Comment: The backing of Pracha by the Puea Thai Party shows the extent to which the Constitutional Court's dissolution of the previous two pro-Thaksin parties and the barring of party executives for five years has obliterated the ranks of senior politicians formally aligned with former

BANGKOK 00003648 002.2 OF 004

Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and prevented Puea Thai from dictating terms to minor coalition partners, as the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party (PPP) had done after the December 2007 elections. End Comment.

¶6. (SBU) The party affiliations of some MPs remain undetermined, but the vote reflected the Democrats' success in recruiting most members of the smaller parties that had formerly supported Thaksin's proxies. The Democrats also drew votes from a meaningful number of former PPP members. By our count, there were 218 former members of the PPP who retained their seats in the House after the party's dissolution; 31 voted for Abhisit. The Democrats, who have formally recruited into their party only two members of dissolved parties, now hold 166 seats and remain heavily dependent on their coalition partners in order to retain a majority in the House. (Note: There are currently 446 MPs in the House, nine suspended pending court review of election violations; at full strength, the House would comprise 480 seats. By-elections will take place January 11 to fill 29 seats vacated by executive board members of the dissolved parties and one seat held by a Democrat MP who died December 15.)

¶7. (C) Although the Democrats appeared confident going into the vote and prevailed by a comfortable margin, they likely did not take this win for granted. When the Ambassador saw Abhisit on December 2 (ref A), he appeared dejected and offered no indication that PPP's dissolution would pave the way for his election as Prime Minister. Press reports indicated that former PPP legislators in Buriram politician Newin Chidchob's faction (supporting the Democrats) were sequestered in advance of the vote, to prevent their being lured to Thaksin's camp. At a small dinner hosted by the Ambassador on December 11, senior Democrat Charoen Khanthawong and Puea Thai Party Leader Yongyuth Wichaidit both suggested that most of the Newin faction MPs would join Puea Thai in the end.

THAKSIN'S DEJECTED TAKE

¶ 8. (C) Thaksin phoned the Ambassador from Milan, Italy after the December 15 vote. Sounding dejected, Thaksin said he was not surprised by the election result. He complained that the Democrats had spent approximately 20 million Baht (approximately \$570,000) per head for Newin faction support, and 10-15 million Baht per vote from other former PPP coalition partners. When the Ambassador noted press reports claimed that Puea Thai was offering 50 million Baht per head to reclaim wayward MPs, Thaksin derided those reports as "stupid" and said that legislators supported Puea Thai because he remained popular with grassroots supporters, and the association with Thaksin would ensure legislators' reelection. Thaksin predicted Abhisit would last no more than six months in office.

¶ 9. (C) Thaksin claimed the current political situation reflected a non-violent coup of sorts by the military and the judiciary. He also claimed that the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) had used military and/or military-trained personnel in its recent seizure of the airports, and this was why the Army Commander refused to take any action against the demonstrators. (Comment: both yellow and red street protesters appeared to have received training from military and police personnel, likely both retired and active duty, see ref B. End Comment.)

¶ 10. (C) Bemoaning his current circumstances, Thaksin said he hoped the USG could help him to receive "justice." The Ambassador noted that he consistently advocated even-handed application of the rule of law. The Ambassador asked about Thaksin's prior, optimistic prediction in July (ref C) that a government of national unity would soon form and Thaksin would receive an amnesty for past offenses. Thaksin indicated this scenario had become less plausible, as he lamented that too many Thais wrongly believed he was opposed to the monarchy.

BANGKOK 00003648 003.2 OF 004

CABINET LIKELY FORMED SOON

¶ 11. (SBU) The Democrats publicly unveiled their new coalition on December 6 after an all-night session of political horse-trading that marked a throwback to the style of Thai politics prior to Thaksin's rise in 2001; despite predictions to the contrary, the new partnership held through the House vote with only a handful of defections. The party leaders have likely already agreed on a distribution of cabinet seats and penciled in their candidates. We expect Abhisit to receive a Royal Command appointing him as Prime Minister in the very near future. It may take a few days more for the Palace, acting on a list to be submitted by Abhisit, to release the Royal Command appointing the next cabinet, which will be inaugurated in the presence of King Bhumibol shortly thereafter.

¶ 12. (C) As of December 15, the front-runner for the position of Foreign Minister in an Abhisit administration was Kasit Piromya, former Ambassador to the United States (2004-05). After retiring from the Foreign Ministry in 2005, Kasit broke with Thaksin, whom he had served as foreign policy adviser, became a Democrat Party official, and worked closely with the PAD. The other candidate often mentioned is Democrat Deputy Leader/MP Kraisak Choonhaven; Kraisak told some diplomats December 10 that he felt his candidacy would be problematic given his long-time association with the Free Burma movement.

REDSHIRTS' REACTION

¶ 13. (SBU) Tens of thousands of pro-Thaksin "redshirts" held a peaceful rally at Bangkok's National Stadium on December 13. The demonstration featured a prerecorded video message from

Thaksin; Thaksin denounced former PPP legislators who were defecting to the Democrats, and he likened the dissolution of the PPP to a "silent coup." Following the House vote on December 15, hundreds of Thaksin loyalists protested angrily at the parliament and tried to block the departure of Democrat MPs. Some cars sustained damage (in at least one case, a shattered windshield) from rocks and bricks thrown at close range by redshirt protesters.

BIOGRAPHIC NOTES

¶14. (SBU) At 44 years of age, Abhisit Vejjajiva will become Thailand's youngest-ever Prime Minister. Abhisit entered politics with the Democrat Party at age 26, winning a seat in the parliament in the March 1992 election. He served as Government Spokesman from 1992-1994, as Deputy Secretary to the Prime Minister in 1995, and Minister Attached to the Prime Minister's Office from 1997-2001.

¶15. (C) Abhisit became Democrat Party Deputy Leader in 2003 and Party Leader in March 2005. He is widely seen as a protege of Chuan Leekpai, the former Prime Minister who retains enormous influence within the Democrat Party. Thai politicians frequently comment that Abhisit is ethical and intellectual but has difficulty appealing to rural Thais; they also claim that Abhisit devotes time to his family at the expense of his political endeavors (note: his two children are known to have learning disabilities). Abhisit appears to rely on others, especially Suthep Thaugsuban, the Democrat Party Secretary General, to undertake difficult political negotiations on his behalf.

¶16. (SBU) Abhisit attended high school in the UK and received a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree from Oxford University. He also holds an LL.B. degree from Ramkhamhaeng University. He formally served in the Army as a Sub-Lieutenant in the mid-1980s, when he lectured in economics at the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy. He is an eloquent English speaker. Abhisit was born on August 3, 1964, in Bangkok. He is married to Ms. Phimphen Vejjajiva, a lecturer in the Department of Mathematics at Chulalongkorn

BANGKOK 00003648 004.2 OF 004

University. The couple have two small children.

¶17. (C) Abhisit has appeared well-disposed to the U.S., and we have long found him very accessible. Unless he has been traveling outside of Bangkok, he has generally accepted our invitations -- such as for a recent coffee at the EMR (ref A) -- and accommodated our requests that he receive our visiting VIPs.

JOHN